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ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 18-A

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
9 May 1986

Casey's chilly press warning

Some disconcerting signals are emerging from a Reagan administration that misses no opportunity to flog Nicaragua's press censors and the tight-lipped Soviets. CIA chief William J. Casey sent the latest one, telling Washington Post editors that news organizations publishing stories on U.S. intelligence-gathering — particularly articles revealing code-breaking capabilities — could face criminal prosecution.

He didn't quite tread into the treacherous waters of prior restraint — the favorite fishing hole of repressive regimes — but he got right up to the bank. Mr. Casey apparently has in mind invoking a 1950 law that prohibits divulging information that would indicate "to a foreign nation that we may have broken their code system."

The specific offenses Mr. Casey cites are of stories about U.S. interceptions between Tripoli and its operatives in East Berlin, a link that the President himself labored long and hard to make exceedingly public.

And there's the rub. When it's to the administration's advantage, the CIA is all too willing to give the public a glimpse of "classified" information — whether it jeopardizes sources or not. The CIA's classified report on a purported Nicaraguan disinformation

offensive, for instance, was merrily proffered to members of Congress and administration critics by Mr. Casey as part of a lobbying effort for aid to the contras. Only stinging criticism from Sen. David F. Durenberger (R., Minn.) got Mr. Casey to stop spilling the beans.

And when the international spotlight focused on the Soviet nuclear disaster in the Ukraine, it was the CIA, once again, that supplied photographs from hush-hush intelligence satellite overflights.

Mr. Casey has played fast and loose with intelligence information too long to cry foul when reporters latch on to bits and pieces that aren't spoon-fed. And at last count, the Justice Department — perhaps still weighing the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling against restraining publication of the Pentagon Papers 16 years ago — was not eager to do Mr. Casey's bidding.

When it comes to *real* security breaches, let the spies and moles — and if need be leakers — be ferreted out. But Mr. Casey needs to make distinctions between protecting intelligence-gathering and a free press that has filled in the blanks left by President Reagan's proffer of "irrefutable" evidence linking Libya to the West Berlin disco bombing.